

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota

1 John 4:7-21
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
August 12, 2018

KIDS' MESSAGE

(Hold globe up at rear of sanctuary and ask kids to identify North America, Minnesota, Aitkin and their house.) **How can God see and care about Planet Earth from way up in Heaven?** It seems like all of the people are so far away from God right?

God in Jesus has come from Heaven to Earth, to Christmas, to baby, to cross, to grave, to resurrection, to baptism, to Holy Spirit, to the hearts and lives of you and your family and neighbors. God is here with us, in us. God is looking out through your own eyes right now. When you look at me, God is looking at me through you. When I look at you, God is looking at you through me. When you look at these people in our sanctuary, God is looking at them through you. When you look at the other kids at your school/day care, God is looking at them through you.

And how does God feel about all those other kids you see, about us gathered here, about you? God sees many people that God loves so much. God loves us each and every one! Thanks be to God. Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

How Ray LeBlanc Became a Lutheran Pastor

(By Wilfred Bockelman, Augsburg Press, Minneapolis, 1985)

“The last thing in the world that Ray LeBlanc wanted to do was to become a preacher, at least, not a Lutheran preacher. He wasn’t even sure he wanted to attend church, particularly not a Lutheran church in which the majority of people were white.

Ray LeBlanc was a black man, and he was on his way up. “Upwardly mobile,” we would say. He was in his last year at the university, combining that with his steady progress in the insurance business. He and his wife both felt that they could make it without the church. They surely didn’t

want to have anything to do with what they recalled as the rather strict legalism of their fundamentalist background.

And then something happened. A little girl was born to them. As she grew up, her parents thought, she ought to be exposed to some kind of religion. The least they could do would be to take her to Sunday school. Perhaps as she got a little older, they could send her, but for now, they would probably have to take her.

So one Sunday they decided to try the church that was closest. It happened to be a congregation of The American Lutheran Church.

As Ray tells the story now: **“The first thing I saw when I got into the church was this beautiful white woman, picking up a dirty, runny-nosed black kid, wiping his nose, hugging him, and saying, ‘I love you.’ At that point I was hooked.”**

A book could be written about the inner struggle that ensued for the next year or so, but the outcome was never in doubt. If that experience was an illustration of what the church could do to people, Ray LeBlanc wanted to be a part of it. He wanted to be a pastor. . . . “

I believe that **Ray LeBlanc** witnessed **“agape.”** Agape is the Greek word, translated as **“love,”** which is used in our 1 John text for today. This agape/love word appears **27 times** in 15 verses. Agape is the kind of love that is **self-giving, sacrificial** and often **undeserved**. The greatest commandment, **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,”** and the second greatest, **“You shall love your neighbor as yourself,”** both use this **agape/love**. Jesus said, **“Love your enemy.”** Same agape. Jesus is not saying that we should **like** our enemy, or **approve of their actions**. He is saying that **their well-being, as fellow humans, created by God, should be our concern.**

Almost 40 years ago, a black man came into a mostly white church and saw a white woman lovingly caring for a little black boy. She didn’t have to be there, didn’t have to be a Sunday school teacher, didn’t have to help that little boy with a runny nose. His skin was a different color from her skin. He may have been the biggest cut-up in her class. And she told the little one that she **loved him**. . . . Ray and his wife and family joined that church. **He wanted to be part of a church that practiced self-giving, sacrificial, often undeserved love.** He went to seminary for

four years, became a pastor and went on to become a leader in our denomination.

I believe that Ray LeBlanc **witnessed God's agape/love**. Self-giving, sacrificial and often undeserved love. God's love moving through that woman changed the direction Ray's life was heading. God's love has the power to do that.

The writer of 1 John is painting a picture of God and a picture of what Jesus' church looks like. 1 John tells us:

1. **God is love.** (Jesus is the best picture we have of God's love for all people and for the whole creation. Jesus dying on the cross for us was self-giving, sacrificial and for undeserving sinners, you and me.)
2. **God's love evokes human love.** (We love because God first loves us. When we truly experience how much God loves us, that love fills and overflows our lives into the lives and world around us.)
3. **Abiding in God's love is abiding in God.** (If God is in us, God's love is in us. If we are in God, we are in God's love. The two are inseparable.)
4. **When we live in God's love, we never need to be afraid.** (We claim and cling to Jesus' promise that God will not condemn or abandon us and the enemy cannot destroy us. **And God clings to us.**)
5. **Other people should be able to recognize followers of Jesus by how we love one another, the neighbor and the creation.**

Therefore, John challenges us to **love one another as an expression of our love-trust relationship with God**. Any love that we manage to muster up for others, becomes a **reflection of God's love and saving will** for all of humanity.

Sometimes our reflection of God's amazing love may be better than at other times. Nevertheless, either way, **God's great love for all people remains the same**. It's just a question of **what we are going to do with God's love**. God's love must be in our lives or we probably wouldn't be here today. Is that true?

God's love flowed into the life of a white woman Sunday school teacher, then into the life of a little black boy, then into the lives of Ray LeBlanc and his family, then into the church families that Ray has since served as a parish pastor. That Lutheran Church, over thirty years ago, was an **outpost of God's agape/love** in a **sometimes hurting, needy and love-starved world**.

Is First Lutheran in Aitkin, Minnesota an **outpost of God's agape/love**? **Self-giving, sacrificial, often undeserved love**? These many years later, in a world still tortured by racial divides, prejudice, hatred and violence, what would Ray LeBlanc see if he came here looking for a place to “**get some religion**” for his little girl? He wasn't looking for God's amazing love, but he found it.

Please turn to one or two other persons and, for one minute each, share one example of some way that you think **God's self-giving, sacrificial and often undeserved love is at work here in our church**, or if you are a visitor, in your own church. After we have shared in our little groups, I will come around and ask for some of you to share your little stories with the rest of us.

(Sharing time and reporting in. . .)

To conclude, I would like to pass along a little report that I just received on Friday. This is from **Dawnya Underwood, Director for Children and Family Services, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services**. She writes:

“After so much heartbreak among the families at our southern border, things are finally beginning to look up. Over the last month, LIRS has been leading the emergency response to the crisis, providing support for children and parents who are being reunited after a traumatic period of separation.

I've seen, firsthand, your gifts in action: providing vulnerable families – more than 400 individuals to-date – with meals, services, immediate shelter, and transportation to their intended destination. Young kids are being welcomed by LIRS partners bearing coloring books, backpacks for their few belongings, and stuffed animals – which provide some measure of comfort in an unfamiliar setting.

Transitioning from the traumatic experience of separation, these families still have many challenges ahead of them. Many of them will need counseling and legal and community services as they seek to rebuild their lives. **But thanks to your generosity, LIRS will continue to walk alongside them through this difficult time.**

While there is still much more work to be done over the coming weeks and months, I wanted to take a moment to thank you for making this work possible. We simply couldn't do it without you."

Those folks at our southern border may **not belong here**. They may be **illegal**. I don't think they are our **enemies**. **But, I am convinced that Jesus loves them. Agape. Love.** John writes, **"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. . . We love because he first loved us."**

God guide us in figuring out how God's love is moving in our own lives and in God's world. Thanks be to God. Amen.